



University of HUDDERSFIELD

University of Huddersfield Repository

Tobbell, Jane and O'Donnell, Victoria

Theorising educational transitions: communities, practice and participation

Original Citation

Tobbell, Jane and O'Donnell, Victoria (2005) Theorising educational transitions: communities, practice and participation. In: Conference on Sociocultural Theory in Educational Research and Practice, 8th – 9th September 2005, University of Manchester. (Unpublished)

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/7743/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk.

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

Theorising educational transitions: communities, practice and participation

Jane Tobbell – University of Bradford
Victoria O'Donnell – University of Glasgow

Transition in education benefits from an established and wide ranging literature which includes transition into education and transition between educational institutions, for children and adults alike. Much of the literature provides rich, descriptive material which serves to illuminate the experiences of those managing the transitions or those undergoing the transitions. However, we would argue that transition is an under-theorized phenomenon and as such meta-understanding and frameworks for intervention are lacking. In this paper we use the community of practice literature to explore the underpinning psychology and sociology of transition with particular reference to learner identity and shifting knowledge frames. Moreover, we argue for a more politicised understanding of participation and employ ecological theory to explore the systemic processes which influence individual trajectories in education and beyond. We conclude by arguing for an ethnographic approach to transition research to address the ontological imperatives which emerge from this proposed theoretical perspective.

It is not a particularly momentous insight to predict that starting at a new educational institution will involve multiple changes. Even without conducting systematic research many discontinuities could be predicted: physical location, peer and carer relationships, social and academic expectations and levels of control. The goal of a successful transition might be constructed as individual students and pupils coming to terms with such discontinuities and learning to manage them (Fabian 2000). Such constructions would indicate the necessity for research which investigates the discontinuities and seeks to understand individual reactions to them. In this paper we explore literature which describes discontinuities at three transition stages: starting school, moving from a junior to senior school and starting university. Whilst we acknowledge the depth of description provided by this research in terms of understanding the discontinuities which individuals in transition must manage, we question the power of the research to understand transition trajectories and suggest this is a result of an under-theorization of transition which has resulted in restrictive research methodologies and a neglect of the psychology of transition.

Transition to school

In this section we provide a necessarily brief review of the international literature which has examined transition to school. Because of the very different ages (between four and seven) at which children start school around the world the review includes kindergarten, pre-school and primary school research. Dockett and Perry (2004) address the issue of what constitutes a good transition into school. To do this they presented parents and teachers with 20 pre-determined

criteria (e.g. the child knows how to line up for class, the child can read, the child has friends at school) and asked them what was most important. Interestingly whilst parents felt academic adjustment was most important, teachers identified adjustment to school context as most important. Dockett and Perry argue for transition programmes which acknowledge the individual nature of transition in order that common goals can be achieved. What seems most pertinent here is the nature of *adjustment*. The questionnaire methodology used does not involve the children or look at the range of quotidian activities in which the children engage and as a result the picture of that which makes a good transition is, at best, partial.

Birch and Ladd (1997) have suggested that the quality of the teacher-child relationship is important in understanding early school adjustment. To investigate this they asked teachers to complete a questionnaire which assessed their relationships with children and correlated the results against standard attainment test and school and social attitude test scores of the children. Unsurprisingly the attitudes of the teachers towards their relationships with the children were linked to school adjustment. That the nature of the child – teacher relationship in adjusting to school is important is valuable information, however, the design of this research does not allow for a complex understanding of the development of such relationships nor about the nature of such relationships.

Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta and Howes (2002) lend more support to the importance of the child – teacher relationship. Again using questionnaire and standard test methodology, they suggest that the most important factor in predicting successful transition to school is family background (high socio-economic status resulting in more successful transitions) but state that a high quality child – teacher relationship can provide an alternative pathway for success in children from low socio-economic backgrounds. An understanding of the nature of the development and experience of such relationships is not permitted by this methodological approach nor is an understanding of why family background promotes successful transition.

Dockett and Perry (2002) have pointed out the absence of the child's voice in much transition to school research and have talked to children about their views of successful transitions. They note that almost without exception children cite knowledge of the rules which will enable them to avoid getting in to trouble as most important. It seems crucial, then, to understand how children might acquire and use knowledge of rules and this would call for a more complex approach to research which situates children in the school context. Fabian (2000) has also interviewed children at school and highlights the importance of communication and friendship in successful transition but once more the detail of how these factors develop and are acted out is lacking.

Whilst La Paro, Pianta and Cox (2000) acknowledge that transition to school has been understood using ecological theory they do not use this tool to explore teacher practices in facilitating transition

into first grade. Brief detail is provided about the nature of the practices (flyers, meetings etc) but there is little discussion about the origin of such interventions or indeed their efficacy. We would argue that this is a result of the lack of theory which surrounds transition, resulting in a somewhat ad hoc approach to its management.

Podmore, Sauvao and Mapa (2003) argue for a socio-cultural perspective in considering transition to school and emphasise the need to understand the context of school for each child. However, they rely on interview data and whilst rich information can result from such an approach, the data are necessarily framed within the limits of self-report methodology.

This brief review serves to highlight major omissions from the literature. Given recent conceptualisations of learning as participation in valued practices (Lave and Wenger 1991) in a given context, the literature does not provide detail or understanding of what actually happens in a classroom; the practices which construct participation and so learning. Children acknowledge the need to know the rules but there is little information of what *constitutes* these rules or *how* children negotiate them. Teachers and parents recognise the importance of relationship but the *nature* of these relationships in the school is not discussed. School is a societally constructed institution designed to promote learning, yet the *content* of that which must be learned remains unexplored. There is an identifiable assumption that the nature of practice, the content of learning or the acts which construct relationship are unimportant in understanding how children negotiate them.

The importance of action and context is further highlighted in the following review of transition from junior to senior school, which argues that much transition research fails to acknowledge the contextual shifts in practice in which learning and relationship are embedded, the negotiation of which constitutes the major work of transition.

Transition from junior to senior school

The junior to senior school literature broadly falls in to two types: traditional psychological research which positions transition problems as a normative problem associated with adolescent dysfunction and descriptive educational research (Tobbell 2003). The psychological methodology is largely questionnaire based. Koenig and Gladstone (1998) suggest that girls who are experiencing the changes associated with adolescence at the same time as a school transition show increased levels of dysphoria (feeling ill at ease). In their research they used the Beck Depression Index and the Pubertal Development Scale. The questionnaire methodology seems to call for the acceptance of many assumptions surrounding notions of development, adolescence and depression.

Simmons et al. (1987) discuss the dramatic shift in biological and social definition that accompanies many school transitions and report that experiencing these multiple changes puts

some groups at risk. Again the methodology was 'measurement' based (Simmons & Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale, Grade Point Averages, pubertal change scores, early dating behaviour, geographic mobility and major family disruption scores). The results are non-conclusive. The girls in the sample reported self esteem drops, according to the measure, when involved in multiple changes but the boys did not. The researchers conclude that girls are more vulnerable to the life stressors – they do not consider that the results might be a function of their methodological approach and that the answers to questionnaires which purport to 'measure' such a complex concept as self-esteem may reflect gender differences in the construction and reporting of feelings (Haug 1998). These gendered results were supported by Hirsch & Rapkin (1987), though in general they report that self-esteem measures rose by the end of grade 7, they caution that for a sub-set of adolescents (which ones is unspecified) this may not be the case. Eckert (1994) challenges any simplistic understanding of notions of gender and self-esteem in the approach to and experience of adolescence. She points out that reported drops in self-esteem tend to reflect certain cultural groups, specifically white middle class girls. African American girls report a reverse trend. She suggests that such results stem from the developmental imperative to move from childhood to womanhood and should more properly be understood as a discursive rather than a biological phenomenon.

Naughton (1997), in a study of 101 year 6 Irish pupils, also notes the developmental significance of the transition age, she states: 'most researchers view the coincidence of early adolescence with the schooling transition as problematic, issues of personal development occurring simultaneously with issues of adjustment to new educational structures and practices.' (p312). Thus, it cannot be the change in practices per se that causes problems but the concomitant onset of adolescence. Bourcet (1998) in his research based in France also concentrates on self-report measures to examine the quality of adolescents' coping mechanisms in a new school, which are found to be problematic in conjunction with transition changes. It is interesting that whilst transition is acknowledged as a phenomenon worthy of attention at many 'stages' in life, in moving from junior to senior school, age specific biological norms are invoked as an explanation.

The remaining literature describes discontinuities as a result of transition. Three major discontinuities have been identified as: curriculum shifts (Williams and Jephcote 1993, Stable 1995, Huggins and Knight 1997, Tobbell 2005), shifts from multiple teaching strategies in junior schools to restricted teaching approaches in senior schools (Doyle and Harrington 1998, Galton and Pell 2002, Tobbell 2003) and environmental discontinuities such as changing classrooms every lesson, lack of space to play, no personal space (Pointon 2000, Comber and Galton 2003, Tobbell 2005). Pointon (2000) and Tobbell (2003, 2005) have talked to children about transition and found that whilst many of the new senior pupils value the extended curriculum available in

senior schools, a significant number experience the new school as controlling and impersonal when compared to their junior school.

Given that transition has been identified as an issue (we are deliberately avoiding the word problem in this paper as we would argue that transition is not a problem per se but rather a fact of most people's lives and to problematise it in the literature is to construct transition in a specific way) throughout most educational careers it seems reductive to attribute a developmental explanation such as the passage through adolescence to one particular type of transition. A more productive avenue for research seems to be the nature of the discontinuities and the reasons why they should impact on student performance. In theory senior schools continue where junior schools stop, so the mathematics work moves from simple algebra to calculus, the English literature from *Wind in the Willows* to Shakespeare and a simplistic view would predict students would move along with the knowledge. However, this is not the case. Instead the context of where and how this knowledge is presented serves to construct the learning. One of us followed children from junior to senior school and observed how the practices which surrounded maths lessons (the pen to use, the position and form of the date, the width of margins) served to deskill children and over a two week period their performance diminished (Tobbell 2005). We would argue, then, that research which neglects context cannot fully address issues in transition.

In the following section we review transition into university and highlight the heterogeneous nature of the student body and in so doing demonstrate the need for a theoretical framework which situates *individuals* in the transition context.

Transition to University

As with research in transition from junior to senior school, the literature on transition to higher education (HE) is rich in description and provides insights into student experience. Yet students in higher education are not a homogeneous group. The British government's policies on widening access and increasing participation mean that students in HE comprise increasing numbers of adult returners. A body of research now provides us with rich descriptions of adult students' transitions to higher education, and of the differences in these experiences between traditional school leavers and adult returners, and between groups of students from differing socio-economic backgrounds.

Exploring the difficulties which students have or have had, in transition to higher education reveals themes such as study skills (e.g. Rhodes et al. 2002, Haggis & Pouget 2002) and feelings of alienation (e.g. Walker Matthew & Black 2004). In much research the academic and the social aspects of transition are explored separately. Macaro and Wingate (2004) investigated the transition of state-educated language students to a prestige university, in terms of their motivation

and strategies for managing the differences in language learning techniques between school and university. Brown, Springett and Szulecka (1986) questioned undergraduates in their final term at university about whether they have ever considered leaving, what factors influenced their decision to stay, and what might be done to make the transition to university easier. Cassidy and Trew (2001) carried out a longitudinal study examining identity change in a group of sixth formers who were then followed up one year later, mid-way through their first year at university.

Walker, Matthew and Black (2004) examined the success of a pre-university-entry programme designed to provide academic and social preparation for pupils from disadvantaged schools, whilst Rhodes et al. (2002) examined the support available to students making the transition from further to higher education. Ramsay (2004) explored an Australian university bridging course for adult returners from a low socio-economic background. Lucas (1990) evaluated a similar programme in the north of England, on the extent to which it provided adequate preparation for university study, and asked students to rate their adjustment to university life on social and academic grounds. Reay (2002) explored the particular problems faced by adults from working-class backgrounds, in making the transition to HE.

This body of research reveals the richness and diversity of students' transitions to HE, and gives a clear insight into some of the difficulties which different groups face. Academic preparation is one factor which students identify as key to their transition. Having appropriate study skills eases the transition (Walker et al. 2004), as is an appreciation of the independent nature of learning at university (Brown et al. 1986), though barriers to transition can then be created if students perceive a mismatch between their own learning style and that which is required at university (Rhodes et al. 2002).

Social integration is a key theme in some early research. For example, Brown et al's (1986) work suggests that accommodating first year undergraduates in halls is important to this end. This is less apparent in more recent research. The increasing numbers of students in HE who remain living in the parental home, coupled with increasing numbers of adult students with families and homes of their own make this aspect of transition less straightforward. Reay (2002) suggests that issues of "fitting in" or "belonging" for adult returners, need to be understood within the context of class subjectivity and feelings of authenticity. HE is viewed by many adults as a means of maximising and fulfilling their potential, but for working-class students this conflicts with their authentic working-class roots and can lead to feelings of being an impostor.

The bridging course for adults from low socio-economic backgrounds, evaluated by Ramsay (2004), is taught in schools within those adults' own communities, which contrasts with universities' own access diploma awards, which are generally taught at the universities themselves. The

courses are equivalent, yet the bridging course seems more successful. Ramsay describes the content of the bridging course as helping students to recognise what they share in terms of social and economic circumstances, and previous educational experiences, and encourages a recognition that all of these have been socially constructed rather than being due to the students' own lack of ability. Ramsay hypothesises that this may counteract the students' insecurities and their lack of confidence through earlier failures and could explain the course's increased progression and retention rates.

All of this research provides us with valuable insights into the subjective experiences of students' transitions to higher education and identifies some of the key factors affecting those experiences. Yet little has been offered in terms of a coherent framework for understanding the psychological processes which underpin transition. Only a small number of papers have attempted to theorise transition in this way, usually through focusing on only one type of adult student at a time, and with limited success.

For example, Ramsay's (2004) paper is essentially descriptive, although she suggests that developing students' understanding of their own, and their communities' location in a broader socio-economic context is empowering, and tentatively links this to Freire's notion of conscientization. In contrast, Cassidy and Trew (2001) use symbolic interactionism and identity theory to examine changes in a number of identities in school leavers over a period of transition to HE. All of the eleven identities showed stability over the study period, suggesting that these identities are inadequate in explaining the changes experienced by individuals through transition to higher education.

Walker et al. (2004) suggest that the pre-university entry programme for pupils from disadvantaged schools succeeds because it promotes a sense of belonging and preparedness. They draw on theoretical models of student non-completion which focus on alienation, as suggested by Bourdieu's (1988) concept of habitus, and Thomas' (2002) concept of educational habitus, referring to the idea that educational institutions favour the knowledge and experiences of white, middle-class, male social groups. Walker et al. (2004) also refer to the work of Tinto (1975), and ideas about the goodness-of-fit between students and the college environment. Students' background traits (e.g. race and family socio-economic background) affect commitment to an educational institution and to the ultimate goal of graduation, which in turn influence integration into the social and academic systems of that institution. Greater commitments lead to greater persistence on the part of the student and lower the chances of non-completion. In order to incorporate the role which individual student difficulties might also play in decisions to persist with a course, Tinto later added factors including financial problems, group-specific difficulties and individual differences in voluntary withdrawal behaviour, as potentially affecting student commitment. Within these theoretical

frameworks, Walker et al. (2004) suggest that without the pre-entry programme, these students would feel alienated at university because of their family background characteristics, and would experience a lack of commitment to the institution due to factors such as those mentioned above. They would therefore have difficulties integrating into the social and academic systems of the university and have no sense of belonging.

These theoretical frameworks suggest reasons for this group of students' difficulties which focus upon situational factors giving rise to feelings of alienation. Alienation, belonging and commitment are umbrella terms which may conceal a range of underpinning psychological factors. Whilst useful in terms of helping to label or organise different students' subjective experiences, they do not provide a framework within which we might understand the psychology of those experiences.

Walker et al. (2004) suggest that the programme provides academic preparation by teaching study skills, and social preparation by familiarising students with the campus and by meeting other students. Whilst the success of the programme is clear, a theoretical framework needs to explain the processes underpinning the development of a sense of belonging, and be able to explain how being familiar with a university campus, for example, would facilitate its development.

What is evident, then, is that a body of literature exists which enables us to gain insight into the subjective experiences of different groups of adults as they make the transition to HE. Previous work has identified social and academic factors which lead to differences in those subjective experiences, but as yet no one theoretical psychological framework allows us to understand the processes which underpin those experiences.

Theorising transition

The three transition reviews above have served to illustrate the shifts in experience and the new demands inherent in joining educational institutions. We have argued for a theoretical perspective which frames transition and so allows for analysis of experience and design and evaluation of interventions to help people manage it effectively. In the next section we begin to construct a theoretical framework in which to situate and understand transition.

Ecological theory

It is our argument that any theoretical framework must account for the individual, their relationships and the context. Educational institutions do not stand alone, they are embedded in society and

subject to the mores and laws of that society. Therefore any framework must also account for the multiple levels of influence. We would suggest that ecological theory, which places individuals in the centre of interactive systems, which represent proximal and distal relationships and processes on an individual's life as well as the historical and political, provides a powerful representation of the transition experience. The model details the interaction of person and environment, which results in idiosyncratic and dynamic developmental processes (Bronfenbrenner 1999). Moreover, it allows for an analysis of the levels and direction of power and control which operate in an individual life.

In terms of transition the model provides an overview of the many levels of change which occur. In proximal processes face to face relationships change, new teachers, new colleagues and new friends enter the student's life. The organisation of the day shifts dramatically, but more than this there are shifts in the exo- and macro- systems which moderate experience. If we accept that all these shifts work together in complex ways to constitute individual experience, then in understanding transition it is incumbent upon researchers to document and theorize the attendant processes. One of us has highlighted the importance of this in previous research (Tobbell 2003) in which the influences of proximal and distal factors in the form of relationships with teachers, the community and wider culture in schools was discussed and the proposal made that the structure of secondary schools works to problematise transition.

Ecological theory provides a framework for understanding the political and personal influences which impact on a student in transition. In our view, however, it does not provide sufficient theoretical power to understand the nature of the individual and her/his trajectories as a result of the interacting embedded systems which frame transition. For this we turn to Lave and Wenger (1991) and their notions of legitimate peripheral participation and the principles of distributed cognition.

Communities of practice (CoP)

CoP is a challenge to traditional transmission models of learning and it is in understanding its notions of practice and participation that the tasks of transition can be understood. Practices, which serve to define a community, are constituted by and constitute the participants. The community is dynamic and the members are developing continually as practices evolve. A CoP does not have a set of practices set in stone, which new members acquire and perform. Rather, in performance the practices are reconstituted and in new membership the practices are developed. To the extent that we all belong to multiple CoPs, we all have a range of different practices that we bring to any situation. The practices are negotiated by the participants. In such negotiations participation is a wholly social endeavour, in essence it is an exchange. Learning is not located in

the individual, instead it is distributed across agent, activity and world. In transition students are joining new communities, in theory they are legitimate peripheral participants in those new communities. We say in theory because we would argue that participation is not inevitable in joining a new school or university, rather it is mediated by a multiplicity of factors which could be explored using an ecological model.

Notwithstanding this, CoP is a useful model for understanding transition. For example, children come from primary school, where they have been full participants (maybe), engaging in the most complex tasks in the school and possessing the most experience of the school but as they move to secondary school, by definition, they become peripheral participants, with no experience of their new community. Their identity is unsure because they don't know what to do, they do not know how to define themselves because they have no access to the practices which will shape their new community and so themselves as participants in that community. This suggests that identity is a distributed phenomenon because it does not necessarily follow that in contexts where the student has a 'personal history and continuity' (Paechter 2003 p546) there is a concomitant lack of surety. The previous sections have detailed the multiple ways in which new educational contexts represent new ways of doing and being and this illustrates how little use previous knowledge might be. There is little continuity of experience.

Distributed cognitions

The notion of distribution becomes very important in understanding transition. The challenges of transition have been discussed above and we have suggested that some research serves to problematise transition. However, we challenge this and suggest that to understand it as a problem is to reify and separate knowledge from context. It supposes that our internal representation of how to, for example, calculate a mean number, can be employed and applied across situation because we know how to do that and knowledge and skills are transferable. That students cannot fully participate in their new institution is not a problem, it is an inevitable by-product of human learning. When we enter new domains we need time to understand and negotiate the skills necessary to function within them. It is not possible to simply transfer behaviours from other domains because they may not be appropriate, instead we wait to see how our present knowledge and skills can be used and in so doing, this knowledge and these skills are developed by and in the new community and as a result the trajectory of participants is changed.

So rather than being a stable, intra-individual entity, cognition is a distributed, social entity. The location of the performance, constitutes that performance. It therefore follows that to understand students undergoing transition a more holistic approach is needed. It is not just a case of

measuring performance and attitude, rather it is about investigating the practices which shape the communities which construct the student's life.

Participation

It is useful to consider the nature of participation and note that it is not implied by mere presence. Participation occurs through mutuality. Mutuality is not just collaboration, it is all the activities of mutual recognition in which human beings engage in a given context: competitive acts, confrontation, co-operation etc. Moreover, participation is transformative both in terms of the individual and the community of practice which contextualises the participation or otherwise. It is this notion of mutuality which foregrounds the importance of student identity, how they participate (or not) and how they react to and interact with practices in the new institution is key to understanding the nature of individual transition.

Identity and Transition

A key factor in understanding transition then is identity and its trajectory in the new community of practice. Identity is not, in this theoretical perspective, a stable or static notion. Instead Wenger (1998) proposes that:

1. *Identity is fundamentally temporal*
2. *The work of identity is ongoing*
3. *Because it is constructed in social contexts, the temporality of identity is more complex than a linear notion of time*
4. *Identities are defined with respect to the interaction of multiple convergent and divergent trajectories*

(p154)

Wenger identifies different forms of trajectory, which perhaps provide interesting characterizations of students in transition:

- Peripheral trajectories – trajectories which do not lead to full participation but do involve identity shifts;
- Inbound trajectories – trajectories which suggest the goal of full participation, even when the participant is peripheral in the beginning;
- Insider trajectories – even when a full participant, practice and meaning and so identity can shift;

- Boundary trajectories – those which span a number of communities of practice, linking them and brokering practices with them;
- Outbound trajectories – trajectories which clearly enable participation in a future community of practice.

The trajectory of the individual student in transition will serve to mediate participation and so learning. Wenger suggests that ‘a very peripheral form of participation, for instance, may turn out to be central to one’s identity because it leads to something significant.’ (p155). In a school setting a very peripheral trajectory may lead to school failure and the attendant life trajectory. It could be argued that it is these trajectories that the transition as problem literature has mostly focused upon. However, it is only one form of participation and thus cannot tell the whole transition story. Students may equally identify an inbound trajectory, being determined to be part of the new institution. Others may identify the outbound trajectory, realising that participation in the institution CoP will enable participation in further or higher education, which may in turn enable participation in the job market.

As such, identity becomes not just a function of historical and contextual factors but also aspirational ones. Notwithstanding this the notion of participation and trajectory involves personal shifts in understandings, the construction and maintenance of new personal relationships and the constant negotiation of meaning and identity. To understand transition attention must be directed to the students, their histories and aspirations and the new community and its history and aspirations. It is these issues which mediate transition.

Researching transition

Given the arguments above, the theoretical framework for transition might be synthesized as the following social ontology: central to the understanding of transition is the notion of participation (or otherwise). Such participation underpins and develops individual identities which shape learning and life trajectories. The process of participation is mediated by a multiplicity of factors. These factors are represented by the ecological systems. Each level in the system represents relationships and affective systems, all of which work together in non-linear and non-predicable ways. Thus participation is embedded within these factors and is shaped by the interaction between them. The central tenet here is that participation is an ontological imperative and the processes which mediate it are central to understanding the psychology and sociology of transition.

Sayer (2000) proposes three ontological layers which need to be addressed in research:

- ◆ The empirical – that which we experience

- ◆ The actual – that which happens which we do not experience
- ◆ The real – the existence of generative mechanisms, which result in tendencies

Clearly not all methodological approaches would fulfil this demand. We would argue that to address the empirical, actual and real in transition the following must be addressed in data collection:

- ◆ to observe and access the practices which shape the different communities of practice of which the students are members;
- ◆ to analyse practice which serves to include students and that which serves to exclude them;
- ◆ to review the different levels and contexts which shape those practices;
- ◆ to understand how these contexts work together to create individual contexts;
- ◆ to examine the learning relationships and how these relate to the educational experience of the students.

Clearly, more closed methodologies would not fulfil these aims. By definition a questionnaire restricts data to that which is asked and seldom allows for the emergence of rich individual experience. Interviews, whilst giving voice to participants, address the empirical and probably cannot fully address the actual and the real. We would argue that the most appropriate approach is an ethnographic one. In ethnography the explicit is rendered implicit and so the empirical, the actual and the real are addressed (though we acknowledge constructed through epistemological position). Through the use of observation and interview moreover the implicit is rendered explicit, which would more directly address the actual and the real. Moreover, ethnographic research allows the researcher to locate her/himself in the context of the students in transition and potentially access a range of meanings at all ecological levels.

Summary

We contend that participation is an objective reality and as such is an ontological imperative in transition. We have suggested that much of the current research, although providing interesting description, does not fully acknowledge this reality. We have argued for a theoretical (communities of practice and ecological theory) and methodological (ethnographic) framing of transition to allow for investigation and understanding of the individual and social processes which underpin participation and its role in students' lives.

References

- Birch S H & Ladd G W (1997) The Teacher – Child Relationship and Children's Early School Adjustment, *Journal of School Psychology*, pp35(1) 61-79
- Bourdieu P (1988) *Homo Academicus*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourcet C (1998) Self-evaluation and school adaptation in adolescence *European Journal of Psychology Education XIII* 4 pp515-527
- Bronfenbrenner U (1999) Environments in developmental perspective: theoretical and operational models in Friedman S L & Wachs T D (eds) (1999) *Measuring Environment Across the Life Span*, APA, Washington DC
- Brown G, Springett N & Szulecka K (1986) Transition and the experience of university: some students' views, *Bulletin of Educational Development and Research*, 32 pp22-25.
- Burchinal M R, Peisner-Feinberg E, Pianta R & Howes C (2002) Development of Academic Skills from Preschool Through Second Grade: Family and Classroom Predictors of Developmental Trajectories, *Journal of School Psychology*, 40(5) pp415-436
- Cassidy C & Trew K (2001) Assessing identity change: a longitudinal study of the transition from school to college, *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, 4 (1) pp49-60.
- Comber C & Galton M (2002) Moving up to Big School in Hargreaves L & Galton M (2002) *Transfer from the primary classroom 20 years on*, London: Routledge Farmer
- Dockett S & Perry B (2002) Who's Ready for What? Young Children Starting School, *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 3(1), pp67-89
- Dockett S & Perry B (2004) What makes a successful transition to school? Views of Australian parents and teachers, *International Journal of Early Years Education* 12(3) pp217-230
- Doyle L & Herrington N (1998) *Bridging the gap: a case study of curriculum continuity at Key stage 2/Key stage 3 transfer*, Management in Education
- Eckert, P. (1994). Entering the heterosexual marketplace: Identities of subordination as a developmental imperative. *Working Papers on Learning and Identity No 2*. Palo Alto, CA: Institute for Research on Learning.
- Fabian H (2000) Small Steps to Starting School, *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 8(2) pp141-152
- Galton M & Pell T (2002) Teaching in Transfer Schools in Hargreaves L & Galton M (2002) *Transfer from the primary classroom 20 years on*, London: Routledge Farmer
- Haggis T & Pouget M (2002) Trying to be motivated: perspectives on learning from younger students accessing higher education, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 7 (3) pp323-336.
- Haug F (1998) Questions concerning methods in feminist research in Burman E (ed) (1998) *Deconstructing Feminist Psychology*, London:Sage
- Hirsch B J & Rapkin B D (1987) The transition to junior high school: a longitudinal study of self-esteem, psychological symptomatology, school life and social support, *Child Development* 58 (1) pp235-1243
- Huggins M & Knight P (1997) Curriculum continuity and transfer from primary to secondary school: the case of history, *Educational Studies*, 23 (3) pp333-348
- Koenig L & Gladstone T R (1998) Pubertal Development and School Transition, *Behaviour Modification*, 22(3) pp335-357
- La Paro K, Pianta R & Cox M (2000) Kindergarten Teachers' Reported use of Kindergarten to First Grade Transition Practices, *The Elementary School Journal*, 101(1) pp63-78
- Lave J & Wenger E (1991) *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Cambridge:CUP
- Lucas S (1990) Open College and the transition to university, *Journal of Access Studies*, 5 (1) pp35-46.
- Macaro E & Wingate U (2004) From sixth form to university: motivation and transition among high achieving state-school language students, *Oxford Review of Education*, 30 (4) pp467-488.
- Naughton P (1997) Time for change a study of primary to second level schooling transition, *Post-Graduate Research Papers*, pp312-326
- Paetcher C (2003) Learning masculinities and femininities: power/knowledge and legitimate peripheral participation, *Women's Studies International Forum* 26(6) pp541-522
- Podmore V N, Sauvao, L M & Mapa L (2003) Sociocultural perspectives on transition to school from Pacific Islands Early Childhood Centres, *International Journal of Early Years*

Education, 11(1) pp33-42

Pointon P (2000) Students' views of environments for learning from the primary to the secondary school, *International Journal of Educational Research*, 33, pp375-382

Ramsay E (2004) Blurring the boundaries and re-thinking the categories: Implications of enabling education for the mainstream post-compulsory sector, *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 44 (3) pp273-305.

Reay D (2002) Class, authenticity and the transition to higher education for mature students, *Sociological Review*, 50 (3) pp398-418.

Rhodes C, Bill K, Biscomb K, Nevill A & Bruneau S (2002) Widening participation in Higher Education: Support at the further education/higher education interface and its impact on the transition and progression of advanced GNVQ students – a research report, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 54 (1) pp133-145.

Sayer A (1998) Abstraction: A realist interpretation in Archer M, Bhaskar R, Collier A, Lawson T & Norrie A (eds) (1998) *Critical Realism, Essential Readings*, London:Routledge

Simmons R G, Burgeson R, Carlton-Ford S & Blyth D A (1987) The impact of cumulative change in early adolescence, *Child Development*, 54 pp 1220-1234

Thomas L (2002) Student retention in higher education: the role of institutional habitus, *Journal of Education Policy*, 17 (4) pp423-442.

Tinto V (1975) Dropout from higher education: a theoretical synthesis of recent research, *Review of Educational Research*, 45 pp89-125.

Tobbell J (2003) Students' Experiences of Transition from Primary to Secondary School, *Journal of Educational and Child Psychology*, 20(4) pp4-14

Tobbell J (2005) Transition from primary to secondary school: communities, practice and participation, unpublished PhD thesis

Walker L, Matthew B & Black F (2004) Widening access and student non-completion: an inevitable link? Evaluating the effects of the Top-Up Programme on student completion, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 23 (1) pp43-59.

Wenger E (1998) *Communities of Practice*, Cambridge:CUP

Williams M & Jephcote M (1993) Continuities and Discontinuities in economic and industrial understanding between the primary and secondary phases, *School Organisation* 13(1) pp61-71